IMAGE, IDENTITY, REPRESENTATION IN VIRGINIA WOOLF'S "JACOB'S ROOM"

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Abstract: *The paper illustrates the way in which Jacob's identity is revealed to us throughout the novel, not so much directly as by means of the impressions that other people have of him. We are only offered a series of images of the main character, which do not actually help us to form a distinct opinion of him, Virginia Woolf stating repeatedly that it is in fact impossible to truly know somebody. This is especially true for someone whose life ends before it really began and who becomes representative of the young men killed during World War I.*

Keywords: *identity, image, impression*.

In the *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* the first meaning of *identity* is "who or what sb/sth is" (Hornby, 1996: 589). A more complicated definition is offered by Fearon, who differentiates between social and personal identity and states that the latter is:

> a set of attributes, beliefs, desires, or principles of action that a person thinks distinguish her in socially relevant ways and that (a) the person takes a special pride in; (b) the person takes no special pride in, but so orient her behaviour that she would be at a loss about how to act and what to do without them; or (c) the person feels she could not change even if she wanted to. (1999: 11)

In other words, personal identity is what sets a person apart from others and may include the person's name, gender, ethnicity, family status, occupation, etc.

The *image* is "a general impression that a person, an organization, a product, etc. gives to the public; a reputation." (Hornby, 1996: 592), while *representation* is "the action of representing sb/sth or the state of being represented". The verb *to represent* has many meanings, among which we should mention: "to be a member of a particular group and be present to speak or act on its behalf"; "to be an example or expression of sth; to be typical of sth"; "to show an image of sb/sth; to depict sb/sth" (Hornby, 1996: 994).

In the novel *Jacob's Room*, Virginia Woolf reveals to us the identity of the main character not so much directly as by means of the impressions the others have of him. We are thus offered various images of Jacob, which we are supposed to put in order as in the case of a puzzle, in order to understand who he is. But, however attentive we are to all details, Jacob's identity still remains elusive. We are not much wiser in this respect at the end of the novel than we were when we began reading it. It is impossible to truly know a person, especially one whose life ends before it really began, as Jacob's did because of the war.

The novel follows Jacob from childhood till a little after his death, chronologically, but not in a traditional manner. There is no plot in the traditional sense of the word. All the reader is offered are some impressions and fragments of dialogues.

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At one point Virginia Woolf comments: “It is no use trying to sum people up. One must follow hints, not exactly what is said, nor yet entirely what is done.” (1992: 25, 149) And this is exactly what she does. The impressions belong to Jacob’s friends and family members, but also to strangers that he meets only once in his life. Actually, the persons who should know him best, his mother and his brothers, do not offer us any insight into what he really is. His brothers do not characterize him in any way. Neither are we offered information about his relationship to them. His mother, Betty Flanders, thinks of him as “the only one of her sons who never obeyed her” (Woolf, 1992: 17) and “was unreasonably irritated by Jacob’s clumsiness in the house” (Woolf, 1992: 66). Captain Barfoot, her admirer, “liked him best of the boys; but as for saying why...” (Woolf, 1992: 66).

His acquaintances and friends are a little more generous with us in this respect. Mrs. Durrant, his friend Timothy’s mother, considers Jacob “extraordinarily awkward (…) but so distinguished-looking” (Woolf, 1992: 55). Timothy Durrant, “never made any comment at all” (Woolf, 1992: 65), while Julia Eliot calls him “the silent young man.” (Woolf, 1992: 65) and Dick Graves considers him “the greatest man he had ever known”. (Woolf, 1992: 105) Two of the women he loves express an opinion of him. Sandra Wentworth Williams also considers him “very distinguished looking.” (Woolf, 1992: 141), while Clara Durrant, Timothy’s sister, writes in her diary, “I like Jacob Flanders (. . .) He is so unworldly. He gives himself no airs, and one can say what one likes to him, though he’s frightening because…’” (Woolf, 1992: 65). Clara does not have sufficient room on the diary page, and, refusing to spill onto the next day, does not finish her idea.

The only “physical description” we have of Jacob is from a complete stranger, Mrs. Norman, the woman travelling in the same compartment with him in the train that takes him to Cambridge. She sees Jacob only once, on this occasion, and will forget him completely afterwards. She is afraid that he might attack her, therefore she studies him carefully while he is reading the *Daily Telegraph*. Maybe the fact that she needs to notice closely a man that she fears makes her see so many details. For the other characters he is just an ordinary fellow, somebody they meet very often, somebody who is familiar to them, so they do not feel the need to study him in detail. To Mrs. Norman Jacob appears as a “powerfully built young man”. (Woolf, 1992: 24)

> Taking note of his socks (loose), of tie (shabby), she once more reached his face. She dwelt upon his mouth. The lips were shut. The eyes bent down, since he was reading. All was firm, yet youthful, indifferent, unconscious – as for knocking one down! No, no, no! [...] Grave, unconscious ... now he looked up, past her ... he seemed so out of place, somehow, alone with an elderly lady ... then he fixed his eyes – which were blue – on the landscape. He had not realized her presence, she thought. (Woolf, 1992: 24)

This is Jacob at 19, but the shabbiness will be present later as well in the form of shabby slippers or trousers.

The author herself finds it difficult to categorize him.

> [...] distinction was one of the words to use naturally, though, from looking at him, one would have found it difficult to say which seat in the opera house was his, stalls, gallery, or dress circle. A writer? He lacked self-consciousness. A painter? There was something in the shape of his hands (he was descended on his mother’s side from a family of the greatest antiquity and deepest obscurity) which indicated taste. Then his mouth – but surely, of all futile

> occupations this of cataloguing features is the worst. One word is sufficient. But if one cannot find it? (Woolf, 1992: 65)

Still, Virginia Woolf presents him as somebody interested since early childhood in animal life. Instead of spending his time with his brothers he wanders alone, collecting the jaw of a sheep found on the beach, a crab, and insects, like glow-worms, which he keeps in pill-boxes, or butterflies. He is also fond of reading. In London he is singled out from the other passengers by the fact that he is the only one carrying a book, Finlay's *Byzantine Empire*. He reads Marlowe at the British Museum and Plato's *The Phaedrus*. When he was a child he was taught Latin and chose the works of Byron in one volume as a keepsake from his teacher. Among his other occupations Woolf mentions playing chess and hunting. He is also successful with women: Clara Durrant, Florinda, Fanny Elmer, two dancers. Of all women, he himself honours Clara Durrant the most. "But to sit at a table with bread and butter, with dowagers in velvet, and never say more to Clara Durrant than Benson said to the parrot when old Miss Perry poured out tea, was an insufferable outrage upon the liberties and decencies of human nature – or words to that effect." (Woolf, 1992: 118) That is perhaps why he gets involved with other, less "honourable" women, such as Florinda, Fanny or even Sandra Wentworth Williams.

But we do not form an opinion about somebody only from the way in which the respective person is seen by others. We have to follow them ourselves. Throughout the novel we see Jacob in various hypostases, sometimes alone, but more often surrounded by people, either his friends (and their families) or mere acquaintances. On these occasions we get only fragments of conversations that are rather attempts at communicating or instances of his behaviour that allow us to form only a superficial opinion about him. For example, we see him at King's College Chapel, attending service. He is attending only physically, otherwise not being particularly attentive, with "his head thrown back" and "his hymn-book opened at the wrong place" (Woolf, 1992: 27) and winking at his friend Timmy Durrant. It is a behaviour maybe typical of an young man in this situation. Or we see him attending a formal dinner party, with the Durrants and others, where he has to wear a dinner jacket and eat properly after six days spent in the open air on the Durrants' boat and eating tinned food and ham from the bone. When he is with his colleagues we find him talking about various things, expressing opinions, arguing about intellectual matters. He appears as a privileged young man, who gets invited in the house of one of his professors, at the Countess of Rocksbier's and at various parties. The Durrants clearly appreciate him, as he spends a summer holiday with them and is invited to join them again the following summer. After parties he is happy to return to his place, enriched by the experience, but also tired and eager to rest.

> It is scarcely necessary to say how well-disposed Jacob felt towards them; how it pleased him to let himself in with his latch-key at his own door; how he seemed to bring back to him into the empty room ten or eleven people whom he had not known when he set out; how he looked about for something to read, and found it, and never read it, and fell asleep. (Woolf, 1992: 106)

The place where a person lives tells us many things about him/ her. Here is a description of Jacob's room in Neville's Court, Cambridge:

> Jacob's room had a round table and two low chairs. There were yellow flags in a jar on the mantelpiece; a photograph of his mother; cards from societies with little raised crescents, coats of arms, and initials; notes and pipes; on the table

> lay paper ruled with a red margin – an essay, no doubt – 'Does History consist of the Biographies of Great Men?' There were books enough; very few French books. […] Lives of the Duke of Wellington, for example; Spinoza; the works of Dickens; the *Faery Queen*; a Greek dictionary with the petals of poppies pressed in silk between the pages; all the Elizabethans. His slippers were incredibly shabby, like boats burnt to the water's rim. Then there were photographs from the Greeks, and a mezzotint from Sir Joshua – all very English. The works of Jane Austen, too, in deference, perhaps, to some one else's standard. Carlyle was a prize. There were books upon the Italian painters of the Renaissance, a *Manual of the Diseases of the Horse*, and all the usual text-books. Listless is the air in an empty room, just swelling the curtain; the flowers in the jar shift. One fibre in the wicker arm-chair creaks, though no one sits there. (Woolf, 1992: 33)

The things he keeps in his room tell us about the important place his mother plays in his life, about the fact that he is active socially, has intellectual preoccupations, likes reading and art. But the room is empty and his presence is only felt as a potentiality.

We also have a description of his rooms in London:

> This black wooden box [...] stood between the long windows of the sitting-room. The street ran beneath. No doubt the bedroom was behind. The furniture – three wicker chairs and a gate-legged table – came from Cambridge. These houses (Mrs. Garfit's daughter, Mrs. Whitehorn, was the landlady of this one) were built, say, a hundred and fifty years ago. The rooms are shapely, the ceilings high; over the doorway a rose, or a ram's skull, is carved in the wood. The eighteenth century has its distinction. Even the panels, painted in raspberry-coloured paint, have their distinction... (Woolf, 1992: 65)

Details from both descriptions are resumed in the final part of the novel, after Jacob's death. He had left everything as if he had expected to return, nothing is arranged. Betty Flanders is confused about everything and does not know what to do with Jacob's shoes, but otherwise the world goes on living. The rooms have been the same since the 18th century.

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>
> There were Sandra's letters.
>
> Mrs. Durrant was taking a party to Greenwich.
>
> Lady Rocksbier hoped for the pleasure…
>
> Listless is the air in an empty room, just swelling the curtain; the flowers in the jar shift. One fibre in the wicker arm-chair creaks, though no one sits there. (Woolf, 1992: 173)

During the novel we see Jacob less in his rooms and more in other places. We see him as a child on the beach in his native Scarborough, then at 19 in Cambridge, and at 22 and 25 in London. He is also interested in seeing other countries. When his mother's cousin dies and leaves him a hundred pounds he decides to use it to travel, and goes to Paris briefly, then crosses Italy and finally reaches Greece. We have no clear impression of his about Versailles, which he visits in Paris. Italy seems to him a hot country, with no grass, only earth clotted into dust even if it is only April, with olive

trees and white villages, very different from England. The first sight of Greece is also disappointing. In Patras "he had met several droves of turkeys; several strings of donkeys; had got lost in back streets; had read advertisements […]; children had trodden on his toes; the place smelt of bad cheese." (Woolf, 1992: 132) After Greece he plans to visit Rome even without money, though he considers Roman civilization inferior. But he does not do it. Together with the Williamses, a family met during the travel, he visits Corinth and Athens, then Constantinople. He is 26. After Constantinople, he returns to London, but does not tell much about his adventure. Bonamy guesses that he is in love, but Jacob does not tell anything about that either.

In spite of all these details, the novel defies any simple classification of Jacob's identity.

> The novel begins with Jacob being lost on the beach and his brother Archer shouting 'Ja-cob! Ja-cob!' (Woolf, 2); in the final chapter, in despair it seems, Bonamy cries 'Jacob! Jacob!' while standing looking out of the window of Jacob's room (Woolf, 225). These cries for Jacob might well be echoed by the reader, because, after over two hundred pages, we are no closer to understanding the real nature of Jacob. This is part of Woolf's exploration of identity: we hear lots of conversations about Jacob; we hear a lot of what he says; we know which authors he has read; which university he attended and the names of the different women he is involved with throughout the novel – but we are no closer to discovering the real Jacob. (Wheeler 2011: 1)

As a matter of fact, throughout the novel, Woolf dwells frequently on our impossibility of truly knowing other people. "Nobody sees any one as he is […]. They see a whole – they see all sorts of things – they see themselves … ." (Woolf, 1992: 25) Or:

> The proximity of the omnibuses gave the outside passengers an opportunity to stare into each other's faces. Yet few took advantage of it. Each had his own business to think of. Each had his past shut in him like the leaves of a book known to him by heart; and his friends could only read the title, James Spalding, or Charles Budgeon, and the passengers going the opposite way could read nothing at all – save 'a man with a red moustache,' 'a young man in grey smoking a pipe.'. (Woolf, 1992: 59)

We are offered only rare access to Jacob's thoughts. Thus, Woolf implies that Jacob's identity, besides being impossible to capture, is constructed by his surrounding community rather than by his internal consciousness and that identity cannot be contained by any single mind or impression. (cf. Farina, 2009) "Moreover, Jacob's details are ultimately insignificant after his sudden death in the novel's final chapter. As Bonamy and Betty Flanders aimlessly catalogue the details of his empty room, Jacob's absence represents the novel's final resignation to the mystery identity." (Farina, 2009)

According to Weston,

> In *Jacob's Room* (...), narrative is a way to process loss by exploring the sense and shape of the absence that loss creates. (...) a third person narrates, creating the sense that while this is a deeply personal loss for his family, it also evokes the generalized sense of collective loss of the generation lost on the battlefields of World War I. This novel is driven by the need to revisit Jacob's life story up until and just after his death as a means of recasting that narrative in the light of his death. (2009: part I)

This theme of loss would then be the reason why the plot of the novel seems incomplete, we have limited access to Jacob's interiority and ultimately we cannot

know him very well. Narratorial incompleteness is a reflection of the sense of incompleteness or lack experienced by those left behind, but it also reflects the incompleteness of Jacob's life. We cannot know Jacob completely because he is not a fully developed personality. He is presented as we recall somebody who died. "*Jacob's Room* uses indirection to confront its readers with the catastrophic loss of a generation through the exemplary death of one its members". (Weston, 2009: part IV) His little absences throughout the novel are then a sort of rehearsal for the final one.

Let us return to the elements that compose personal identity. Name: Jacob Alan Flanders. Gender: male. Ethnicity: English. Family status: single. Occupation: student. But a person is much more than this. And yet, even if we have seen Jacob's image in the eyes of various people and the way in which he becomes a representative of the young men who died during World War I, we cannot say with certainty that there is much else we know about him.

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